

THE EASTERN PANTHER ON FILM? RESULTS OF AN INVESTIGATION

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INTRODUCTION

The continued occurrence of the panther or puma (*Felis concolor*) in northeastern North America has been debated for decades (Bruce S. Wright, 1972, *The Eastern Panther: A Question of Survival*, Clarke, Irwin, Toronto; Robert L. Downing, 1984, *The Search for Cougars in the Eastern United States*, *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 3: 31-49; *The ISC Newsletter*, 1990, The Eastern Puma: Evidence Continues to Build, Winter). The spring, 1990, videotaping in New Brunswick, Canada, of a large felid in the wild brings the question of the Eastern puma (*F. c. cougar*), a subspecies considered extinct by many authorities, into a new dimension. It is possible that the filmed individual represents this very subspecies. Regardless, never before has a free-ranging puma—wild or escaped/released captive—been photographed or filmed in the Northeast. I hope that, with this evidence, skeptics will be hard pressed to continue denying the species' presence there.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

In June 1990, Ted Reed, founder and director of the New Hampshire-based Friends of the Eastern Panther, contacted me to discuss my willingness to travel to New Brunswick to meet with provincial wildlife officials and view a privately-owned videotape, made on 15 May, 1990, of an unidentified felid thought by some to be a puma. Having long been interested in the possible existence of the Eastern puma, and having more recently assisted in extensive field work tracking, capturing, and radio-tagging pumas in Yellowstone National Park, I readily agreed.

Reed and I viewed the 10-minute videotape on July 6 at the New Brunswick Department of Natural Resources and Energy (NBDNRE) office in Fredericton. Our host was regional wildlife biologist Gary Moore, who, along with furbearer specialist David Cartwright, the acting Chief of Wildlife Management, had been our primary contact in arranging the screening. Accompanying the video was an impressive array of still and aerial photographs, measurements (made using survey stakes and the known location of the animal, certain trees, and camera at various times), and a reenactment videotape—all assembled by Moore and his colleagues. The latter item, produced using the original camera in its original positions, was especially noteworthy because it featured a 40-50 lb (18-23 kg) chocolate-colored

Labrador retriever (*Canis familiaris*), an animal that compared favorably in general size with the cat in the original film.

After replaying the video several times, Moore, Reed, and I compared notes, discussed our individual thoughts and impressions, and reviewed Moore's on-location tests and trials, as well as the pending work of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) crime laboratory in Ottawa.

From the DNRE facility, we drove to the Waasis, New Brunswick home and workshop of the videotapers, Donna and Roger Noble, where we conducted an hour-long interview. We spent the remainder of the day reconnoitering the area where the video had been taped.

RESULTS

Gary Moore and David Cartwright are to be highly commended for their handling of this incident, from their courteous treatment of the video's makers-owners to their solicitation of outside expert opinion—including that of the renowned RCMP crime lab—as well as their own painstaking and time-consuming measurements and analyses. Their work is a credit to the province.

Filmed in late afternoon along the mixed forest border of a south-central New Brunswick farm field, the videotape is hardly a masterpiece of modern cinematography. Made by Roger Noble while Donna, his sister-in-law—the camera's owner—shouted instructions and looked on from afar, his unfamiliarity with the device—and his breathlessness after seeing the cat, charging from their workshop, and calling for the camera—are evident. Replete with nervous wavering, long-distance shots, poor resolution, and irrelevant aiming, the video reminded me of the famous Patterson Sasquatch film.

Nonetheless, there are several clear sequences of the animal performing a small repertoire of behaviors—walking, crouching, hiding, leaping. The cat's color in the low-angle evening light against a green backdrop is tawny orange. Its underside and inner legs were creamy white. Interestingly, this 2-tone pelage was essentially identical to that of whitetailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) encountered during the visit, the animal that presumably would make up the bulk of the Eastern puma's diet.

The cat's build, particularly in the shoulders, was impressive, its sinewy muscles rippling through its immaculate coat as the animal walked the edge of the grassy field. It was initially unconcerned, apparently, by the two people nearby; the distance between the cat and the witnesses ranged from about 160 to almost 500 feet (~ 50-150 m). The cat's thick, cylindrical tail was $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{2}{3}$ the length of its body, and typically held low, drooping almost to the ground, then curling up at the tip. The animal's sex was not discerned.

The cat's relative proportions were best visualized in a 5-10 second sequence when it stepped out of the patchy 2-5 inch (5-13 cm) grass of the field onto a dirt road. It paused, looking at the camera with its body at a

slightly oblique angle (Fig. 1). It then returned to the forest border. In the forest shadows, the cat's fur took on a more tan hue.

In the final scene of the video, the cat, still in the shadows, leaps upward and out of view into the woods, as if into a nearby tree. It was in that brief footage that the animal's heft, and its lithe and fluid grace, were best exemplified. The effect was impressive and very convincing.

Because of the lack of known-size reference points with which to simultaneously compare the cat during the video, it was very difficult to accurately estimate the animal's size. My impression was of a healthy young puma. Based on their use of film superimposition techniques, geometry, and the dimensions of several trees measured subsequently, experts at the RCMP crime lab arrived at a standing body length estimate of 20–25 inches (51–64 cm). This does not include the tail. The crime lab found no suitable points at which to measure the cat's height. I estimate that 16–20 inches (40–50 cm) from the ground to the top of the walking cat's head would be realistic.

Our search of the area failed to yield any puma sign, but that was not surprising; the incident had occurred 2 months earlier, and in the subsequent time the field had been mowed and the area trampled. The absence of claw marks on the trees seen in the final sequence led us to conclude that the cat had not leapt into a tree, but into the forest and shadows beyond.

As for the witnesses, never have either doubted that what they saw was indeed a puma, and both have been overwhelmed by all the attention they, their quaint farm, and videotape have received. Mrs. Noble, the mother of several young children, was particularly unsettled by the sighting. Clearly, the animal, with its size, grace, and mystique, had left her awed and more than a little frightened.

Moore, Reed, and I all concluded that this tawny, unspotted, long-tailed cat was a puma. Based on experience with western pumas, I placed it at about 8–12 months old. I think the cat was probably a subadult recently separated from its mother and wandering in search of a home range. Contact with humans had presumably been minimal or nonexistent. A statement detailing these conclusions was submitted to the DNRE at Gary Moore's request.

The origin and subspecific status of the cat will likely remain unknown, and in any case may be immaterial. That the cat was alive and apparently healthy, managing to survive in the New Brunswick forests, is sufficient. There are probably others. DNRE biologists continue to receive puma reports from all over southern New Brunswick, just as Bruce Wright did in the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's.

The original videotape remains in the possession of the Nobles. They have authorized use of parts of it to various periodicals and news agencies. In September, 1990, the DNRE issued an official press release detailing the incident and its handling. A copy of the videotape and related materials are



FIG. 1.—Image of a large felid from the videotape taken in Waasis, New Brunswick, in the spring of 1990 by Roger Noble. The author concludes that the felid was a subadult puma, *Felis concolor*, possibly representing the thought-extinct Eastern puma subspecies, *F. c. cougar*.

available for review at the DNRE office, R.R. 6, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada E3B 4X7.

FUTURE PLANS

In cooperation with Friends of the Eastern Panther, a series of puma tracking and sign identification workshops has been scheduled throughout southern New Brunswick and New England for early 1991.

Additionally, a proposal for a puma sign survey in the Fundy National Park area of New Brunswick—a rugged, untamed region that traditionally has held promise as one of the last strongholds of the Eastern puma—has been submitted. It is Ted Reed's hope that this wild and scenic area, long threatened by major development, will ultimately receive recognition and protection as an expansion of Fundy National Park—the Bruce S. Wright Panther Preserve.

I am grateful to Robert L. Downing and Ted Reed for reviewing this report and making helpful suggestions. I also wish to thank Joyce and Jerry Wiland, who continue to perform innumerable administrative functions. Also, I extend special thanks to Margaret Gurnett, of Bozeman, Montana, and Charles

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Postscript: It is with great sadness that I report that, on October 23, 1990, while returning home from a meeting with the provincial Minister of Natural Resources and other interested parties, David Cartwright, 43, died in a auto accident. He will be missed by all who knew him. Regrettably, he will never know the success of what only hours earlier he had helped create—the New Brunswick Panther Recovery Team.